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Guest Commentary: Gold King Mine owner: Don't shut down Silverton mining

By Todd C. Hennis

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As the owner of the Gold King Mine and a 33-year mining industry veteran, I was devastated by the mine's Aug. 5 blowout and by the photos of the Animas River turned orange.

Even knowing disaster on the mountain was inevitable, I was stunned by the real thing and that it happened at one of my mines. My heart went out to my friends in Silverton and to the communities downstream.

I'm also grateful the Environmental Protection Agency has taken full responsibility for the blowout, and I've been pleased with the cleanup work the EPA and the state have been doing. They've had my full cooperation.

Now, as the conversation expands to long term solutions, a newly available EPA report states outright that the water in the Gold King Mine comes from the neighboring Sunnyside Mine. That has been my contention for 14 years, and a warning I raised regularly in community and stakeholder meetings attended by the EPA.

Sunnyside's owner, the Kinross company, is therefore responsible for the cost of stopping Sunnyside water flow to other mines and for treating all Sunnyside water.

Beyond long-term water management, however, there's another question I know people are asking: "What's next for mining in the San Juans? Should it be shut down?"

No. Shutting down mining in the San Juans would be devastating for the United States. The Silverton Mining District is one of the most highly mineralized places in the world, rich in the strategic minerals required for green energy, high tech and national defense. Today, U.S. industry imports most of these minerals. In many cases, China is the world's primary supplier. China achieved this position by pricing their minerals cheaply starting in 1980, forcing U.S. and worldwide operations to shut down, and they have already used this leverage as a political club.

Other countries see this threat and are taking action, even countries deeply committed to protecting the environment and to sustainability. France, for example, sees in-country mining as a strategic imperative, and they're working to revive the industry. Their goal is to ensure French

manufacturers have reliable access to the minerals they need before an imbalance in global supply and demand creates skyrocketing costs and interruptions in availability.

Silverton was a critical mineral source during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War, and the minerals required by U.S. industry today are abundant there.

In addition, mining offers the best opportunity to capitalize on the specialized skills of the Silverton workforce; to benefit from the county's pro-mining sentiment; to return prosperity to a community impoverished when the last mine closed; to return businesses that are seasonal now to year-round operation; and to generate significant local, state and federal taxes.

Some of the minerals found in abundance in the district:

Tellurium: Used in high tech, including thin film solar panels. China supplies 43 percent of U.S. imports, and the Gold King Mine may represent America's largest available tellurium resource.

Tungsten: Used to produce machine tool parts, armor, super alloys and electronics. It is almost entirely imported. The San Juan Mountains have the world's highest documented ore grades.

Indium: Essential to LCD screen technologies and solar cells. All of U.S. consumption is imported, and significant quantities come from China.

Bismuth: Used in pharmaceuticals and fire sprinkler systems. U.S. production stopped in 1997. China supplies 26 percent of U.S. imports. The San Juans represent a large part of U.S. bismuth production potential.

Antimony: Used in battery production, flame retardants, and paints. No antimony is mined in the U.S., with 67 percent of imports from China. Antimony is found throughout the western San Juan.

Gold: The western San Juans offer the best means of rapidly increasing gold production when needed.

Silver: Critical to electronics manufacturing, and is a common byproduct when mining the minerals listed above.

The Silverton Mining District is a strategic reserve of minerals critical to key U.S. industries, and our community is ready to tap that reserve. The district must be managed for mining operation, not mining termination.

Todd C. Hennis is president of the San Juan Mine Corp., and owner of the Gold King Mine.